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Differentiation of self and marital adjustment across the family life cycle

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**DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF AND MARITAL ADJUSTMENT ACROSS THE
FAMILY LIFE CYCLE**

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Resumo

A Teoria Familiar Sistémica de Bowen tem sido empiricamente testada ao longo das últimas três décadas. Estudos empíricos sugerem que a Diferenciação do Self (Differentiation of Self - DoS) está positivamente associada a bem-estar psicológico, ajustamento conjugal, indicadores de funcionamento familiar, entre outras variáveis. Contudo, a sua relação com o ciclo de vida não foi investigada, até ao momento. O esquema de ciclo de vida familiar de McGoldrick, proporciona um modelo robusto para abordar tarefas e relações tanto individuais como familiares. O objetivo deste estudo foi explorar a DoS ao longo dos sete estádios do ciclo de vida familiar e, adicionalmente, a sua associação com o ajustamento conjugal, numa amostra espanhola. Utilizou-se o Spanish-Differentiation of Self Inventory (S-DSI) para avaliar o nível de diferenciação, e a Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) para o ajustamento conjugal. A amostra ($N = 506$) foi distribuída pelos sete estádios do ciclo de vida familiar, formando grupos de 40 a 133 indivíduos. Os resultados indicaram que indivíduos no Estádio VII revelaram níveis significativamente mais baixos de diferenciação que indivíduos nos outros estádios, excetuando o Estádio V, enquanto que do Estádio I ao Estádio VI, as diferenças não foram significativas. O ajustamento conjugal parece decrescer ao longo do ciclo de vida familiar. DoS e ajustamento conjugal apresentaram uma associação positiva ao longo de todo o ciclo de vida familiar, com correlações particularmente fortes nos estádios V, VI e VII. Serão discutidas direções para futura investigação e implicações para os profissionais que trabalham com indivíduos, casais e famílias, ao longo do ciclo vital.

Abstract

Bowen Family Systems Theory has been empirically tested over the past three decades. Empirical studies suggest that Differentiation of Self (DoS) is positively associated with psychological well-being, marital adjustment and family functioning indicators, among other variables. However, the relationship between DoS and family life cycle stages has not been addressed so far. McGoldrick family life cycle framework has provided a robust model in addressing both individual or family tasks and relationships, throughout the life course. The aim of this study was to explore DoS across the seven family life cycle stages, and additionally its association with marital adjustment, in a sample of Spaniards. The Spanish-Differentiation of Self Inventory (S-DSI) was used to assess the level of differentiation, and marital adjustment was measured with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). Our sample ($N = 506$) was distributed across the seven life cycle stages, forming groups of 40 to 133 individuals. Results showed that individuals in stage VII revealed significantly lower levels of differentiation than individuals in the other stages of family life cycle, excluding Stage V, whereas from Stage I to Stage VI there were no significant differences. Marital adjustment seems to decrease throughout the family life cycle. DoS was positively associated with marital adjustment across all life cycle stages analysed, with particularly strong correlation indexes at stages V, VI and VII. Directions for future research and implications for professionals working with individuals, couples, and families across all the life course will be discussed.

Index

Introduction	1
Differentiation of Self	1
Family Life Cycle	2
Marital adjustment and family life cycle	4
Differentiation of Self, Marital Adjustment and Family Life Cycle	6
Purpose of the Present Study	8
 1. Method.....	 9
1.1. Participants	9
1.2. Materials	10
1.3. Procedure	10
1.4. Statistical Analysis	11
 2. Results	 12
2.1. Socio-Demographic and Descriptive Results	12
2.2. Differentiation of Self Across Family Life Cycle	13
2.3. Marital Adjustment Across Family Life Cycle	14
2.4. DoS and Marital Adjustment Association in Family Life Cycle Stages	15
 3. Discussion	 17
 4. Conclusion.....	 20
 References	 21

Introduction

Bowen developed the foundations of his theory nurtured by his clinical practice, supervisor experience, and his work with his own family of origin (1978), creating a fertile system of ideas and one of the most comprehensive theory in family therapy (Nichols, 2013). Bowen's concept of *Differentiation of Self* (DoS), in particular, has received great attention from both clinical practice and research. Empirical studies have supported many basic assumptions of Bowen's Theory regarding the role of differentiation in social and emotional functioning (Skowron, Van Epps, Cipriano-Essel, & Woehrle, 2014). However, DoS stability across the lifespan has not been addressed so far.

At life cycle transition points, individual and family stress are often high, as families must rebalance, redefine and realign their relationships (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2016). Research suggests that life transitions like entering adulthood (Bleidorn, 2012), beginning a relationship (Leikas & Salmela-Aro, 2015), parenthood (Marshall, Simpson, & Rholes, 2015) and retirement (Schwaba & Bleidorn, 2018), take major importance to individuals and can be linked with changes in personality traits. At the same time, there is a reciprocal process between the way that a particular individual uses his or hers own self during a life event, and the way that family interacts with him (Frost, 2014). The main goal of the present study is to explore DoS across the seven family life cycle stages postulated by McGoldrick et al. (2016), and the association between DoS and *marital adjustment*.

Differentiation of Self

DoS is the cornerstone of Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) and received great attention from the author throughout his lifework. This concept defines people according to the degree of fusion, or differentiation between emotional and intellectual systems (Bowen, 1978). It has been described as the capacity to think, reflect, be flexible and act wisely rather than respond automatically to emotional pressures (Nichols, 2013). Rodríguez-González & Martínez Berlanga

(2014) summarized it as “the ability for the emotional self-regulation” (p.7) on its intrapersonal dimension, whereas on the interpersonal dimension it is expressed in the degree that a person modulates, in an adaptative way, attachment and autonomy in his relationships.

From a theoretical point, Bowen assumed differentiation as a universal characteristic, that can be used to categorize all people on a single continuum:

At the low extreme are those whose emotions and intellect are so fused that their lives are dominated by the automatic emotional system. These are the people who are less flexible, less adaptable and more emotionally dependent of those about them. They are easily stressed into dysfunction, and it is difficult for them to recover (...) At the other extreme are those who are more differentiated. (...) They cope better with life stresses, their life courses are more orderly and successful. (Bowen, 1978, p. 362)

Higher levels of differentiation have been associated with improved psychological adjustment (e.g., Hainlen, Jankowski, Paine, & Sandage, 2016; Murdock & Gore Jr., 2004; Skowron & Dendy, 2004), as well as psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Ross & Murdock, 2014; Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009). DoS has shown positive correlations with marital quality and satisfaction (e.g., Bartle-Haring & Lal, 2010; Peleg, 2008; Rodríguez-González, Skowron, Cagigal, & Muñoz, 2016), and family relations functioning (e.g., Choi & Murdock, 2017; Knudson-Martin, 1996). In addition, DoS is associated with lower levels of familiar conflict and violence (e.g., Likcani, Stith, Spencer, Webb, & Peterson, 2017; Skowron, 2005; Skowron, Kozlowski, & Pincus, 2010).

Family Life Cycle

Families are the foundation of our experience of the world, our first relationships, and our first sense of belonging to a group (McGoldrick et al., 2016). As they are the primal place for individual growth and development, families are challenged to respond to individual life cycle of their members and simultaneously have to adapt to community, culture, and society over time. Assuming that family

models, family life cycle patterns and even some of its phases changed dramatically in the past century, McGoldrick et al., (2016) developed a *family life cycle* scheme, using “the concepts of stages and tasks to define the changing relationships, status, and membership in families at transition points over the life course” (p. 23). Each family member’s response to later-life challenges evolves from earlier established patterns and resolution of earlier or present life developmental tasks (Kim-Appel, Appel, Newman, & Parr, 2007). The framework was simplified for the purpose of this work and presented in Table 1. Kapinus & Johnson (2003) argue that to research “the family life-cycle stage is indeed a useful theoretical as well an empirical tool” (p. 178). It has been empirically validated in multiple areas such as parenting (e.g., Machado, 2008), stress (e.g., Solomon, Zur-Noah, Horesh, Zerach, & Keinan, 2008), anxiety (e.g., Hollander, 2007) and therapy (e.g., Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, & White, 2003).

Table 1

Phases of the family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2016)

Family Life Cycle Phase	Emotional Process of Transition	Second-Order Tasks
1. Emerging Young Adults	Accepting emotional and financial responsibility for self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Differentiation of self in relation to family of origin b. Development of intimate peer relationships c. Establishment of self in respect to work and financial independence d. Parents shifting to consultative role in young adult's relationships
2. Couple Formation: The Joining of Families	Commitment to new expanded system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Formation of couple system b. Expansion of family boundaries to include new partner and extended family c. Realignment of relationships among couple, parents and siblings, extended family, friends, and larger community
3. Families with Young Children	Accepting new members into the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Adjustment of couple system to make space for children b. Collaboration in child-rearing and financial and housekeeping tasks c. Realignment of relationships with extended family to include parenting and grandparenting roles
4. Families with Adolescents	Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to permit children's independence and grandparents' frailties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Shift of parent-child relationships to permit adolescent to have more independent activities and relationships and to move more flexibly into and out system b. Families helping emerging adolescents negotiate relationships with community c. Refocus on midlife couple and career issues. d. Begin shift toward caring for older generation

Family Life Cycle Phase	Emotional Process of Transition	Second-Order Tasks
5. Launching Children and Moving On at Midlife	Accepting a multitude of exits from and entries into the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Renegotiation of couple system as a dyad b. Development of adult-to-adult relationships between parents and grown-up children c. Realignment of relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren d. Exploration of new interests/career, given the freedom from child care responsibilities e. Dealing with health needs, disabilities, and death of parents (grandparents)
6. Families in Late Middle Age	Accepting shifting generational roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Maintaining or modifying own and/or couple and social functioning and interests in the face of physiological decline: exploration of new familial and social role options b. Supporting more central role of middle generations c. Making room in the system for the wisdom and experience of the elders
7. Families Nearing the End of Life	Accepting the realities of family members' limitations and death and the completion of one cycle of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Dealing with loss of spouse, siblings, and other peers b. Making preparations for death and legacy c. Managing reversed roles in caretaking between middle and older generations

Marital adjustment and family life cycle

Satisfaction with the romantic relationship takes major importance on the quality of life of individuals in the romantic dyad, “the ideal itself costs us all a tremendous amount in terms of our ability to be ourselves, find harmony in our relationships, and support the tasks of family life” (McGoldrick et al., 2016, p. 259). The presence of distress in conjugality has been linked to increased risk for mental and physical health problems, depression and anxiety, explaining why this field of investigation has been so prolific (e.g., Graham, Diebels, & Barnow, 2011; Graham, Liu, & Jeziorski, 2006). From an interpersonal perspective, relationship satisfaction is closely associated with better dyadic coping, i.e. the process partners use to cope with stressors as a couple (Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015), and even with better child functioning (e.g., Howes & Markman, 1989).

Marital adjustment over the course of life has received great interest since the first study of Hamilton in 1929 (Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975). Previous cross-sectional research suggests a U-shaped pattern in the relationship between marital adjustment and family life cycle, declining in the early years of marriage and rising in the later years, with the highest levels of marital adjustment in preparental and empty-nest phases (e.g., Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Feeney, Peterson,

& Noller, 1994; Lawson, 1981, 1988). However, recent research suggests that individuals reveal higher levels of marital adjustment in *couple formation: the joining of families* (Stage II¹), and declines over time (Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992; Tucker & Aron, 1993; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005), with the steepest decay in marital satisfaction occurring during the earliest and latest years of marriage (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001; Wiltgen Tissot & Falcke, 2017).

Marital satisfaction has been shown to decrease throughout *families with young children* (Stage III), and at same time, it has been empirically validated that one of the best predictors of the grade of decrease after the birth of a child, is the level of satisfaction before and during pregnancy (Benkovskaia, 2008; Menezes & Lopes, 2007; Siemens, 1992). Turning to *families with adolescents* (Stage IV), Wiltgen et al. (2017), reported an increase of marital adjustment, exception face the other studies cited above.

Launching children and moving on at midlife (Stage V), “has been associated with both positive and negative consequences for parents” (Bouchard, 2013, p. 69). Results revealed that satisfaction with life was significantly associated with both husband and wives own marital adjustment, and the amount of contact with their adult children (Bouchard, 2018; Bouchard & McNair, 2016). Cross-sectional studies tend to reveal higher levels of marital adjustment in the *empty nest* phase, whereas longitudinal designs reveal continuous decline (Dush et al., 2008).

Focusing *families in late middle age* (Stage VI), “the effects of retirement on marital quality appear to be subtler and more complex than previous research has suggested” (Davey & Szinovacz, 2004, p. 460), indicating that marital satisfaction at this stage relies on a conjugation of multiple factors. For both individuals at this phase as in *families nearing the end of life* (Stage VII), it has been empirically validated that low marital adjustment predicts psychological distress and loneliness (Ducharme, 2016; Stokes, 2017; Trudel, Villeneuve, Preville, Boyer, & Frechette, 2010).

¹ The use of roman numbers to identify stages was intended to facilitate correspondence with previous studies.

Differentiation of Self, Marital Adjustment and Family Life Cycle

DoS research has expanded to specific questions inside different individual and family life cycle stages. Concerning adolescents, findings suggest that less differentiated ones may be at risk for high levels of academic test anxiety, low levels of cognitive performance and higher social anxiety (Peleg, 2004, 2005), furthermore DoS predicts greater psychological and interpersonal well-being over time, in young adult college students (Skowron et al., 2009). As for couples a large body of work confirmed that greater differentiation predicts greater levels of marital adjustment (Glad, 1999; Gubbins, Perosa, & Bartle-Haring, 2010; Lampis, 2016; Lampis, Cataudella, Busonera, & Skowron, 2017; Rodríguez-González et al., 2016; Skowron, 2000) and low emotional and marital distress (Dekel, 2010), additionally findings suggest that DoS is a predictor of desire, intimacy and couple satisfaction (Ferreira, Fraenkel, Narciso, & Novo, 2015; Ferreira, Narciso, Novo, & Pereira, 2014, 2016). Focusing on childrearing, research also suggests that parents' higher levels of DoS predict better adjustment for both children (Peleg, 2005; Peleg, Miller, & Yitzhak, 2015; Ponappa, Bartle-Haring, Holowacz, & Ferriby, 2017; Skowron, 2005) and parents (Richards, 1989). Moreover among divorced parents, higher self-differentiation is associated with better co-parental relationships (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

Although differentiation was conceptualized by Bowen as a highly-stable characteristic, the basic self may be changed through psychotherapy or critical life events, "on the basis of new knowledge and experience" (1978, p. 473). According to Bowen, when the family system is emotionally fluid it can be more amenable to the discussion of emotional issues or change. This state is more likely to be found in life cycle transitions as the birth of a child and "family upsets such as deaths, serious illness, reunions, weddings, or other stressful or significant family events." (1978, p. 496). Peleg's (2014) results indicate that higher levels of stressful life events in childhood and adolescence are correlated with higher levels of fusion with others in adulthood, and suggests that positive experiences may strengthen family members' relationships and increase their levels of DoS. Even though there is a solid body of research analyzing DoS, there is a scarcity of studies exploring its relationship with the family life cycle or family transitions. As stated by Kim-Appel, Appel, Newman, & Parr (2007), very little data exist addressing DoS stability across

the lifespan. We found only four studies referring participants in specific life cycle stages (Bell & Harsin, 2018; Hu, Sze, Chen, & Fang, 2015; Kim-Appel et al., 2007; Richards, 1989).

Observing couples in the Stage III (families with young children) and Stage IV (families with adolescents) of the family life cycle, Richards (1989) confirmed the correlation between DoS and marital adjustment.

Kim-Appel et al. (2007), noticing that the studies on Bowen's differentiation targeted mainly the age range from early to middle adulthood, focused on individuals age 62 years or older. In accordance to McGoldrick et al. (2016) conception that individual and family stress is often greatest at key transition points in life, these authors were interested in the elders psychological symptoms in response to developmental tasks (past or present), such as dealing with the empty nest transition, the post parental marital relationship adjustment, death of a spouse, illness, or grandparenthood. Results showed an inverse relationship between level of differentiation and symptomatology, empirically supporting Bowen's perspective that DoS would be related to psychological adjustment or symptomatology even across later life stages "and represent a move forward for support for Bowen's concept of differentiation across the lifespan" (Kim-Appel et al., 2007, p. 229).

Hu et al. (2015), took a closer look at the differences between stages according to Bowen concepts and marital quality. They found that the family-of-origin triangulation of both husbands and wives predicted marital satisfaction, but furthermore, couples in Stage III reported higher family-of-origin triangulation and less satisfaction and cohesion than couples in Stage IV. Even though a measure of differentiation was not used, in accordance with Bowen, both triangulation and fusion are related to a lack of differentiation, and this is a first step in comparing individuals on different stages of the family life cycle.

Bell & Harsin (2018), developed a prospective longitudinal study in order to evaluate the trajectory of marital relationship *connection* and *individuation* at midlife, then again in later life. In the two waves, couples participated in home interviews where they described their family, then discussed differences of opinion. Discussions were coded using a Global Coding Scheme (GCS), by coders trained in systems theory. Connection processes focus on affection and a supportive family climate, nurturing trust and self-esteem. Individuation focuses on respect and clear interpersonal boundaries within the family, nurturing personal autonomy and self-

differentiation. Results revealed significant relationships between marital functioning at midlife and connection and individuation in later life. Additionally, individuation at midlife, and by extent differentiation, was associated with less conflict in later life. This study gives new empirical support to the association between differentiation and marital relationships in different stages of family life cycle, suggesting that higher levels of differentiation, predict less conflict in subsequent stages.

Purpose of the Present Study

In sum, research has supported the importance DoS can assume in both social and emotional functioning, as well in marital adjustment. The scarce empirical studies published showed this relevance in different stages of the family life cycle, even though not all lifespan as has been addressed so far. The present study aimed to (i) explore DoS across the seven stages of family life cycle; (ii) analyze differences in marital adjustment between stages II through VII of the family life cycle; and (iii) test whether higher levels of differentiation of self are associated with higher levels of marital adjustment in each stage of the family life cycle.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Our sample ($n = 506$) derived from a larger study (Rodríguez-González, 2016). Participants were Spaniard adults (271 women, and 235 men) that took part in a study investigating the link between DoS and other variables, on a volunteer basis.

From the initial group of 669 respondents, we excluded individuals that could not be sorted according to the seven phases of the family life cycle ($n = 163$; e.g. single or divorced parents, senior couples without children, rearranged families). Participants were then categorized within a life cycle phase according to their transitional tasks and suggested ages (McGoldrick et al., 2016), using the following criteria:

1. *Emerging young adults* ($n = 51$): singles with a partner but no cohabitation, aged 30 or under and no children.
2. *Couple formation: the joining of families* ($n = 94$): individuals with partner and cohabitation for less than 15 years, aged 50 or under and without children.
3. *Families with young children* ($n = 133$): people with partner and cohabitation, with at least one child aged 12 or under.
4. *Families with adolescents* ($n = 72$): participants with partner and cohabitation, with the oldest child aged less than 18 and youngest being more than 12.
5. *Launching children and moving on at midlife* ($n = 61$): subjects with partner and cohabitation for more than 18 years, all children are adults (youngest aged 18 and upper) and at least one of whom still lives at home.
6. *Families in late middle age* ($n = 55$): participants with partner and cohabitation for more than 18 years, aged more than 50 and less than 70, all offspring have left home.
7. *Families nearing the end of life* ($n = 40$): participants with 70 years or more.

1.2. Materials

Socio-demographic information was collected using an *ad-hoc* self-report questionnaire. For the current study, we consider information about sex, age, level of education, relational status, relationship length, home residents, number of children and children ages.

Differentiation of self was assessed using the Spanish-Differentiation of Self Inventory (S-DSI; Rodríguez-González, Skowron, & Anchía, 2015). The instrument was adapted from the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). S-DSI is a 26-item self-report measure, with answers scored from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). Higher scores indicate greater differentiation of self. Rodríguez-González et al. (2015) reported good alpha reliability ($\alpha = .85$). In the current sample, S-DSI showed a high reliability ($\alpha = .92$).

Marital adjustment. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), a 32-item questionnaire, was used to assess the quality of the relationship between married or cohabiting couples. Thirty items are scored in a six points Likert-type scale, and two items in a yes/no response. Global score range from 0 to 151, with higher values indicating greater marital adjustment. In this research, we used the validation by Soleto and Carrasco (1997; $\alpha = .93$). The alpha coefficient for our sample was .96.

1.3. Procedure

This convenience sample was recruited from general population, using a snowball strategy. Inclusion criteria were being Spaniard, residing in Spain, and being 18 years of age or older. All volunteers received an informed consent outlining the purpose of the studies and were informed that the survey was anonymous. Participants received full instructions, a socio-demographic questionnaire and a complete set of measures, together with a pre-paid envelope for returning their responses (via mail or hand-delivered). Measures were presented in random order to avoid fatigue effects on any given questionnaire, and the assessment took approximately 50 minutes to complete. This research project was developed following the human subjects research guidelines statement by the Office of

Research Ethics from the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain), obtaining IRB approval.

1.4. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 25). Sex differences and socio-demographic bias were analyzed using independent samples T-tests. Bivariate associations between S-DSI e DAS were tested to assure absence of multicollinearity (Field, 2009). Null-hypothesis of normality and homogeneity of variances were rejected for both S-DSI and DAS. Mixed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to assess the differences between participants in different family life cycle stage, for both S-DSI and DAS. Effects of S-DSI on DAS across family life cycle were evaluated with ANCOVA analyses. Pearson correlation was used to associate S-DSI and DAS in each stage of family life cycle.

2. Results

2.1. Socio-Demographic and Descriptive Results

Participants ($n = 506$) had a mean age of 44.6 years ($SD = 14.51$) ranging from 19 to 81 years old. In average, men were 46 years old ($M = 46.31$; $SD = 14.98$), and women were 43 ($M = 43.12$; $SD = 13.94$). The majority of these individuals were employed (70,8%) and had a university or higher education degree (58.5%). Table 2 shows demographic characteristics per life cycle stage.

Concerning DoS, participants reported a mean value of 3.93 ($SD = 0.91$) in the S-DSI total score. No significant differences were found in differentiation levels between men ($M = 3.99$; $SD = 0.95$) and women ($M = 3.88$; $SD = 0.88$), $t(504) = 1.32$, $p = .188$.

Results for DAS ($M = 113.14$; $SD = 23.54$) revealed non significant differences between men ($M = 112.84$; $SD = 23.71$) and women ($M = 113.41$; $SD = 23.42$), $t(489) = -0.27$, $p = .791$.

Analyses were also conducted for each stage, regarding sex differences in study variables. Significant differences were found only in stage I (emerging young adults), with men revealing higher levels of differentiation, $t(49) = 2.18$, $p = .035$. Mean values and standard deviations for study variables in each of the life cycle categories are presented in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Table 2*Socio-Demographic Statistics, S-DSI and DAS by family life cycle stage*

		Total	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV	Stage V	Stage VI	Stage VII
Participants	<i>n</i>	506	51	94	133	72	61	55	40
Sex (%)	Men	46.4	45.1	39.4	46.6	47.2	47.5	50.9	55.0
	Women	53.6	54.9	60.6	53.4	52.8	52.5	49.1	45.0
Age	<i>M</i>	44.60	26.24	32.51	38.15	47.24	55.20	61.40	73.90
	<i>SD</i>	14.50	2.85	5.19	5.78	5.05	4.82	5.39	3.46
Education (%)	No formal education	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.8	1.4	0.0	1.8	10.0
	Middle school (11-13 age)	12.5	9.8	1.1	12.0	11.1	13.1	21.8	32.5
	High school (18-19 age)	27.5	29.4	28.7	14.3	29.2	36.1	38.2	35.0
	Higher education	58.5	60.8	69.1	72.9	58.3	50.8	38.2	22.5
Job Situation (%)	Employed	70.8	80.4	84.0	80.5	81.9	78.7	43.6	0.0
	Unemployed	17.0	19.6	13.8	19.5	15.3	18.0	23.6	5.0
	Retired	12.3	0.0	2.1	0.0	2.8	3.3	32.7	95.0
Relationship duration	<i>M</i>	17.60	.00	3.60	9.53	19.29	29.16	35.53	48.48
	<i>SD</i>	14.79	.00	3.46	4.79	4.04	4.42	6.69	6.92
Number of children	<i>M</i>	1.74	.00	.00	1.88	2.69	2.43	2.69	3.52
	<i>SD</i>	1.62	.00	.00	.84	1.70	1.04	1.49	1.78
S-DSI	<i>M</i>	3.93	4.09	4.08	4.00	4.01	3.70	3.96	3.31
	<i>SD</i>	.91	.83	.71	.80	.88	1.02	1.08	1.15
DAS	<i>M</i>	113.14	121.57	121.31	111.90	115.18	104.67	113.12	94.14
	<i>SD</i>	23.54	15.73	17.57	17.85	22.43	28.13	27.24	35.96

2.2. Differentiation of Self Across Family Life Cycle

S-DSI mean scores are illustrated in Figure 1. We found significant differences in DoS between family life cycle stages, $F(6,499) = 4.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Post-Hoc *Scheffe* test revealed that individuals in Stage VII (families nearing the end of life) have significantly lower differentiation levels than individuals in the other stages ($p < .05$), excluding Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). We conducted a second analyses for the first six stages, and no significant differences were found $F(5,460) = 1.78$, $p = .116$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Mean scores comparisons were made for each item of the S-DSI scale, between Stage VII and

the other stages. Only in item 4 “*When someone close to me disappoints me, I withdraw from him/her for a time*” individuals in stage VII revealed significant lower scores than individuals in the other stages $t(504) = -2.06, p = .04$. As the S-DSI scale has some of its items concerning partner relationship, score levels were compared between married and widowers participants in stage VII, resulting in non significant differences $t(38) = .19, p = .85$.

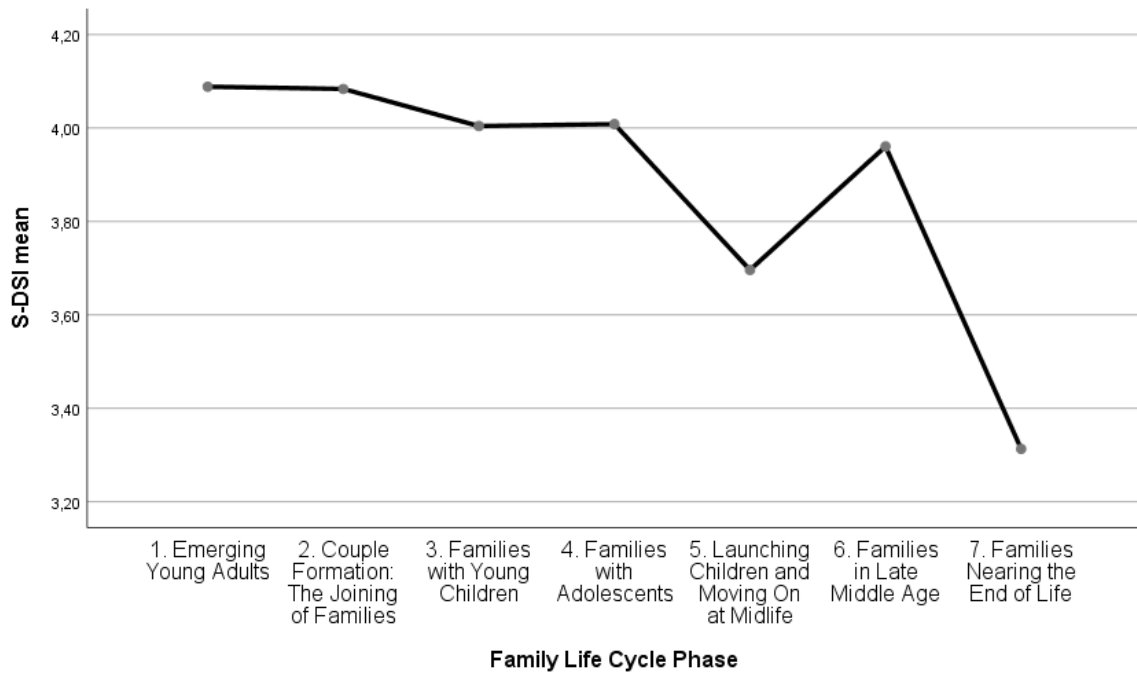


Figure 1. S-DSI mean scores across family life cycle

2.3. Marital Adjustment Across Family Life Cycle

Regarding our second question that marital adjustment declines from Stage II (couple formation: the joining of families) to stage VII (families nearing the end of life) of family life cycle, individuals in stage II revealed the highest levels of marital adjustment ($M = 121.31$; $SD = 17.57$) as seen in Figure 2.

In order to analyse differences between transitions concerning the earliest and latest years of marriage, independent samples T-Tests were conducted. Results revealed that individuals in Stage III (families with young children) have significant less marital adjustment than individuals at Stage II, $t(220) = 3.89, p <$

.001, and individuals in Stage VII have significant less marital adjustment than individuals at Stage VI (Families in Late Middle Age) $t(54.05) = 2.62, p = .012$.

Comparing all stages together, ANOVA analyses showed significant differences, $F(5,435) = 8.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. Post-Hoc *Scheffe* test revealed that individuals in Stage II have significantly higher marital adjustment levels than individuals in Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife) and Stage VII ($p < .05$), whereas individuals in Stage VII have significantly lower marital adjustment levels than individuals in the other stages ($p < .05$), excluding Stage V.

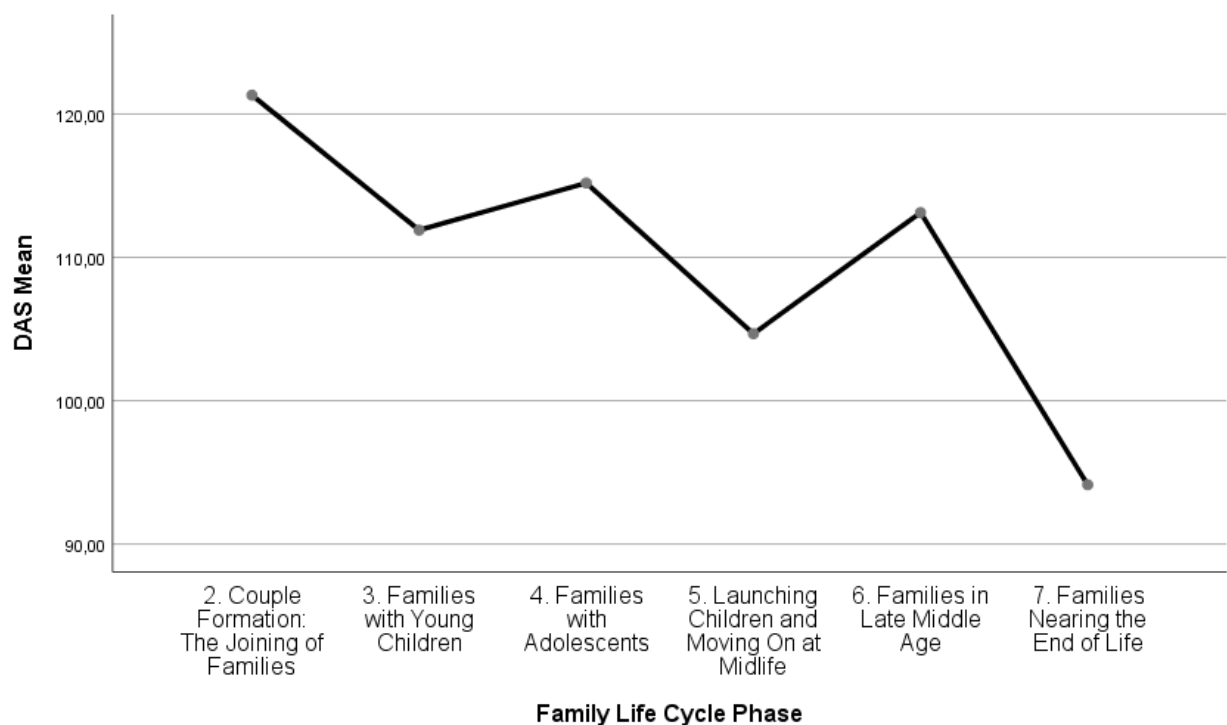


Figure 2. DAS mean scores across family life cycle

2.4. DoS and Marital Adjustment Association in Family Life Cycle Stages

Concerning the third question, positive associations were observed between DoS and marital adjustment across all family life-cycle, as shown in Table 3. An ANCOVA analysis revealed that there are significant differences in marital adjustment across life cycle stages, even after controlling for DoS, $F(5,434) = 4.86, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$. Moreover, the amount of unexplained variance reduced to 117,574.69 units, face 232,880.90 when analysing DAS alone.

Table 3*Correlations between S-DSI and DAS by family life cycle stage*

	Total	1. Emerging Young Adults	2. Couple Formation	3. Families with Young Children	4. Families with Adolescents	5. Launching Children	6. Families in Late Middle Age	7. Families Nearing the End of Life
r	.710**	.641**	.488**	.659**	.497**	.821**	.818**	.903**
n	491	50	91	131	70	61	55	33

** $p < .01$

3. Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to explore DoS across the life cycle and additionally its association with marital adjustment, using a cross-sectional design. Results revealed differences in DoS across family life cycle, specifically showing that individuals in Stage VII (families nearing the end of life) presented significant lower levels of differentiation than individuals the other stages, excluding Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). In order to understand these values, in a first step, we looked to items of S-DSI, to evaluate if there were notorious differences in responses to some of them. Only in item 4 “*When someone close to me disappoints me, I withdraw from him/her for a time.*” individuals in Stage VII revealed significant lower scores than individuals in the other stages. As items are reverse scored, this lower value contributes to a higher value of differentiation. Thus lower levels of DoS found at Stage VII, could not be explained by specific questions of the inventory, that could be inadequate to this participants. Likewise, no significant differences were found regarding marital status in Stage VII. Therefore, in our sample, there was no evidence of instrument problems with this life cycle phase. Regarding gender, age and other socio-demographic variables differences on DoS, research has shown contradictory results (Kim-Appel et al., 2007). Focusing on individuals with old age, our results were consistent with Major et al. (2014) showing that individuals in elder group scored significantly lower levels of differentiation than younger groups, however contradictory with Skowron et al. (2003) that found higher levels of the intrapersonal dimension of DoS (i.e., emotional reactivity) in older participants. One possible explanation could be based on the concept of societal emotional process, one of the eight interlocking concepts of the Bowen theory (Bowen, 1978). Emphasizing that the present study has a cross-sectional design, birth and childhood of participants in Stage VII took place in a historical context particularly different from other participants. They were born between 1934 and 1947, in 1936 started the *Spanish Civil War* that lasted until 1939, precisely the year that *World War II* commenced and endured until 1945. These events had a major impact in Spain, and likely in our participants and their parents lives, suggesting that these circumstances could have some influence in differentiation levels. As proposed by Bowen “All things being equal, you emerge

with about the same basic level of differentiation your parents had. This is determined by the process before your birth and the situation during infancy and early childhood” (Bowen, 1978, p. 409). On the other way, another possible explanation relies on the family life cycle itself, that the increase of dependency on others and diminished control of one’s life at this stage (McGoldrick et al., 2016), could reduce DoS levels. Similar studies with a longitudinal design, different populations, and historical background would be of major interest in order to enlighten this questions. As for clinical practice, according to Bell & Harsin (2018) and Kim-Appel et al. (2007), better levels of differentiation in this particular stage predicts better marital adjustment, lower levels of depression and psychological symptoms. Therefore, our results may suggest that, in this age group, differentiation could be a critical therapeutic goal.

Concerning the second question, our results seems to suggest that marital adjustment declines from Stage II (couple formation: the joining of families) to Stage VII (families nearing the end of life), consistent with previous research (e.g., Dush et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 1992; Tucker & Aron, 1993; Umberson et al., 2005). Furthermore, in line with previous studies (Menezes & Lopes, 2007; VanLaningham et al., 2001; Wiltgen Tissot & Falcke, 2017), we draw two sub-hypotheses to analyse if the steepest decay in marital adjustment indeed occurs during the earliest and latest years of marriage. Our first sub-hypothesis was (i) individuals in Stage III (families with young children) have significant less marital adjustment than individuals at Stage II, that was confirmed; and the second (ii) individuals in Stage VII have significant less marital adjustment than individuals at Stage VI (families in late middle age), was also confirmed. However, when evaluating marital adjustment across all stages of family life cycle, although differences remain significant, they are likely to be explained by the significantly decline of marital adjustment in Stage VII. Individuals in Stage VII showed significant lower marital adjustment than the other stages, excluding stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). Likewise, individuals in Stage V revealed significant lower marital adjustment than individuals in Stage II. These outcomes seem to suggest that some life cycle transitions could predict a more severe decline in marital adjustment, rather than the duration of the relationship. We propose that these are the stages most challenging and demanding for the dyadic functioning. In Stage III one of the second order tasks is the adjustment of couple system to make space for children, whereas in Stage V

its renegotiation of couple system as a dyad (McGoldrick et al., 2016). At Stage VII, marital satisfaction relies on a conjugation of multiple factors (Davey & Szinovacz, 2004) such as retirement, loss, dependency, illness (McGoldrick et al., 2016). Additionally, at this stage individuals have to deal with the potential death of the spouse or his own, and so the ending of the dyad. As the decline of marital adjustment has been empirically described, it would be critical to develop intervention programmes. Previous findings suggest that better levels of marital adjustment in predecessor stages will predict a less severe decline (Bell & Harsin, 2018; Menezes & Lopes, 2007). Efficacy evaluation could provide a better understanding of the processes that play a role in this decline and additionally how to approach it from intervention or clinical perspective.

Our third question was also corroborated, indicating an overall positive association between differentiation and marital adjustment, coherent with previous research (e.g., Gubbins et al., 2010; Lampis, 2016; Lampis et al., 2017; Rodríguez-González, 2016; Skowron, 2000). This association remains significant and positive in every stage of the family life cycle, with particularly strong correlation indexes at stages V, VI and VII, complementing preceding studies (Bell & Harsin, 2018; Hu et al., 2015; Kim-Appel et al., 2007; Richards, 1989). Moreover, the differences found in marital adjustment across family life cycle, are significantly associated with differentiation levels, suggesting that more differentiated individuals are likely to have better marital adjustment across all stages of family life cycle. These results provide new empirical support, for Bowen's hypotheses about the relationship between greater DoS in couples and their marital adjustment, through all lifespan. They also underline the relevance of working with differentiation in clinical practice, essentially on couple and family therapy, as it may be possible to improve marital functioning (Rodríguez-González, 2016).

Some limitations should be appointed, to enrich further research. First, as cross-sectional study, we were able to compare individuals in different family life cycle stages but unable to fully address DoS development. Cross-sectional design also limits general conclusions and causal relationships between variables. Sample dimension and discrepancy between sub-samples constrain group comparisons. Lastly, in order to address family life cycle, we had a large number of dropped cases belonging to a vaster family diversity, and no comparison was made between subjects and dropped cases.

4. Conclusion

Despite some limitations, the present study provides valuable information regarding DoS across the seven life cycle stages, and its association with marital adjustment. In sum, our results suggest that DoS remains highly stable along the greatest extent of family life cycle, although there could be differences linked with life-cycle transitions on later stages of life. Specifically, individuals in stage VII (families nearing the end of life) revealed significantly lower levels of differentiation than the other stages of family life cycle, excluding Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). Future studies exploring the research questions, presented on this study, with different populations, and historical background, will be needed for a better understanding of the lower DoS levels founded in Stage VII. Concerning marital adjustment, our data showed a global decrease across family life cycle, particularly evident in Stage VII. Higher levels of DoS are associated with higher levels of marital adjustment across all family life cycle, with particularly strong association at stages V, VI and VII. Future implementation of longitudinal studies will be essential to provide a better understanding of DoS development throughout the life-cycle and its relationship with marital adjustment. Finally, focusing clinical practice, our findings highlight the importance of addressing marital adjustment across lifespan in order to prevent or revert its decline, but furthermore, they emphasize the relevance of working with differentiation to this intent.

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APPENDIX

Spanish-Differentiation of Self Inventory Dyadic Adjustment Scale

1. Cuestionario I

Estas son preguntas que tienen que ver con pensamientos y sentimientos sobre usted mismo y las relaciones personales con otros. Por favor, **lea cada afirmación y decida cuales son normalmente ciertas en relación a usted**, en una escala del 1 (nada) al 6 (mucho). Si cree que una afirmación no es aplicable a usted (por ejemplo: ahora mismo no está casado o comprometido en una relación, o uno o ambos padres han fallecido), por favor, conteste la afirmación intentando aproximarse a lo que sus pensamientos y sentimientos serían en esta situación. **Asegúrese de que responde a todas las afirmaciones** e intente ser tan sincero y preciso como le sea posible en sus respuestas.

Totalmente en desacuerdo – En desacuerdo – Más bien en desacuerdo – Más bien de acuerdo – De acuerdo – Totalmente de acuerdo

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6

1.	La gente suele decirme que soy excesivamente emocional	1	2	3	4	5	6
2.	Tengo dificultades para expresar mis sentimientos a las personas que me importan	1	2	3	4	5	6
3.	A menudo me siento inhibido cuando estoy con mi familia	1	2	3	4	5	6
4.	Cuando alguien cercano a mí me desilusiona, me alejo de él/ella por un tiempo	1	2	3	4	5	6
5.	Tiendo a distanciarme cuando la gente se acerca demasiado a mí	1	2	3	4	5	6
6.	Desearía no ser tan emocional	1	2	3	4	5	6
7.	Mi esposo/a o pareja no toleraría que le expresase mis verdaderos sentimientos sobre algunas cosas	1	2	3	4	5	6
8.	A veces mis sentimientos me desbordan y tengo problemas para pensar con claridad	1	2	3	4	5	6
9.	Con frecuencia me siento incómodo/a cuando la gente se me acerca demasiado (físicamente)	1	2	3	4	5	6
10.	A veces sufro muchos altibajos emocionales	1	2	3	4	5	6
11.	Estoy preocupado por perder mi independencia en las relaciones personales más cercanas	1	2	3	4	5	6
12.	Soy excesivamente sensible a la crítica	1	2	3	4	5	6
13.	Con frecuencia siento que mi esposo/a o pareja quiere demasiado de mí	1	2	3	4	5	6
14.	Si he tenido una discusión con mi esposo/a o pareja, tiendo a pensar en ello todo el día	1	2	3	4	5	6
15.	Cuando una de mis relaciones personales es muy intensa, siento la necesidad de alejarme	1	2	3	4	5	6
16.	Las discusiones con mis padres o hermanos/as aún consiguen hacerme sentir fatal	1	2	3	4	5	6
17.	Si alguien está enfadado/a o entristecido/a conmigo, no soy capaz de dejarlo pasar fácilmente	1	2	3	4	5	6
18.	Nunca consideraría acercarme a algún miembro de mi familia para buscar apoyo emocional	1	2	3	4	5	6
19.	Fácilmente me siento herido por otros	1	2	3	4	5	6
20.	Cuando estoy con mi esposo/a o pareja, normalmente me siento asfixiado	1	2	3	4	5	6
21.	Con frecuencia me pregunto qué tipo de impresión doy a los demás	1	2	3	4	5	6
22.	Normalmente, cuando las cosas van mal, hablar de ellas las empeora	1	2	3	4	5	6
23.	Vivo las cosas más intensamente que otros	1	2	3	4	5	6
24.	Si mi esposo/a o pareja me diese el espacio que necesito, nuestra relación personal podría ser mejor	1	2	3	4	5	6
25.	A veces me encuentro físicamente mal después de discutir con mi esposo/a o pareja	1	2	3	4	5	6
26.	Me preocupa que la gente cercana a mí se ponga enferma, esté triste o enfadada o les pase algo	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. Datos sobre la relación con su pareja

(conteste sólo si ha contestado afirmativamente a la pregunta 2.1. / Relación estable de al menos 6 meses de duración)

Indique, por favor, el grado aproximado de acuerdo o desacuerdo entre usted y su pareja en cada uno de los temas que figuran a continuación:

	Siempre de acuerdo	Casi siempre de acuerdo	Ocasionalmente en desacuerdo	Frecuentemente en desacuerdo	Casi siempre en desacuerdo	Siempre en desacuerdo
1. Manejo de finanzas familiares						
2. Cuestiones de ocio						
3. Cuestiones religiosas						
4. Demostraciones de afecto						
5. Amistades						
6. Relaciones sexuales						
7. Convencionalismos (conductas correctas o apropiadas)						
8. Filosofía de vida						
9. Relaciones con los familiares próximos (padres, suegros, etc)						
10. Aspiraciones, objetivos y cosas consideradas importantes						
11. Cantidad de tiempo pasado juntos						
12. Toma de decisiones importantes						
13. Tareas domésticas						
14. Actividades, intereses en el tiempo libre						
15. Decisiones relacionadas con el trabajo						

	Todo el tiempo	Muchas veces	A menudo	Ocasionalmente	Raramente	Nunca
16. ¿Con qué frecuencia ha hablado o considerado el divorcio, la separación o el fin de la relación?						
17. ¿Con qué frecuencia usted o su pareja han abandonado la casa después de una pelea?						
18. En general ¿con qué frecuencia piensa que las cosas entre ustedes van bien?						
19. ¿Confía en su pareja?						
20. ¿Lamenta haberse casado? (o vivir juntos)						
21. ¿Con qué frecuencia riñen?						
22. ¿Con qué frecuencia “se sacan de quicio” uno a otro?						

	Todos los días	Casi todos los días	Ocasionalmente	Raramente	Nunca
23. ¿Besa a su pareja?					

	En todas	En muchas	En algunas	En muy pocas	En ninguna
24. ¿Se comprometen juntos en actividades ajenas a la casa o a la familia?					

¿Con qué frecuencia diría que ocurren las siguientes situaciones entre ustedes?

	Nunca	Menos de una vez al mes	Una o dos veces al mes	Una o dos veces a la semana	Una vez al día	Muy a menudo
25. Tener un intercambio estimulante de ideas						
26. Reír juntos						
27. Charlar sobre algo						

